Sabda, Public Reason, and Plural Societies: The Cohesive Tetrad as an Architecture for Democratic Truth Governance

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Abstract

Contemporary democracies rely heavily on the language of human dignity, rights, and the public good when they justify laws and policies, yet their dominant models of public reason are designed to keep explicit appeals to Sabda, understood here as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos, at arm's length from the structure of public justification (Rawls 1993, 1997; Habermas 1996, 2006). Building on previous work that developed The Cohesive Tetrad as a framework for truth governance and argued that pure logic, human capacities, evolution, and social contracts are insufficient to ground the strongest dignity claims in law and policy (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b; Waldron 2012; Nussbaum 2006), this article makes three moves. First, it reconstructs Rawlsian, Habermasian, and liberal neutrality models of public reason and shows that, under pressure from minimal dignity axioms, they tend to drift toward either empty secularism, in which democratic procedures remain but the horizon of norm and telos becomes hollow, or fearful theocracy, in which one interpretation of Sabda is elevated into a political authority insulated from correction (Taylor 2007; Forst 2012; Casanova 1994). Second, it articulates The Cohesive Tetrad as a six register architecture for democratic truth governance built around Sabda, Logic, Qualia, Mistika, Akhlak, and Intention–Trace Alignment, the degree of alignment between epistemic intention and epistemic moral trace, and redefines public reason as a multi register practice in which all claims about coercive laws pass through these registers under the conditions of universality of address, non coercion of conscience, accountable interpretation, and protection of dissent (Fraser 1990, 2008; Forst 2012; MacIntyre 1981). Third, it applies this architecture to stylised cases in bioethics, social policy, and artificial intelligence governance, contrasting the outcomes it yields with those of empty secularism and fearful theocracy (Kittay 1999; Fineman 2008; Pellegrino 1999; O'Neil 2016; Eubanks 2018). The result is a model of democratic truth governance under Sabda that preserves core liberal achievements while providing a more stable grounding for strong dignity claims in plural societies and preparing the way for a subsequent analysis of law and artificial intelligence.

Keywords: *Sabda; human dignity; public reason; pluralism; democratic truth governance; The Cohesive Tetrad; artificial intelligence; secularism; theocracy.*

1. Introduction

Contemporary democracies speak fluently in the language of human dignity, rights, and the public good. Constitutions announce the inherent worth of every person, courts invoke dignity to decide hard cases, and policy documents routinely justify interventions by appealing to the protection of vulnerable lives (Waldron 2012; Andorno 2013; Nussbaum 2006). This vocabulary is not merely ornamental. It carries heavy normative weight, especially when societies dispute questions at the limit of life and death, social inclusion, and technological control.

At the same time, in many democracies the deepest moral energy that animates public struggles for justice and protection of the vulnerable is explicitly grounded in religious traditions and in claims to a Word that speaks authoritatively about what humans are and what they are for (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007). Movements that defend the poor, protest humiliation, or resist degrading forms of exploitation often draw on scriptures, liturgy, and communal memories that are explicitly framed as responses to a revelatory address. Yet the dominant theoretical models that govern what counts as a legitimate public justification tend to regard such sources as acceptable only in a private or motivational register. Citizens may be moved by them, but they are expected, at some point, to translate their reasons into a vocabulary that does not rely on any particular revelatory source.

This generates the central puzzle that animates the present article. On the one hand, democratic publics lean heavily on a thick moral vocabulary of human dignity and telos when they ask what may and may not be done to persons in law, policy, and technology. On the other hand, mainstream theories of public reason are designed to keep claims that explicitly invoke a Word with authority over norm and telos at arm's length from the structure of public justification (Rawls 1993, 1997; Habermas 1996; Audi and Wolterstorff 1997). Democracies thus depend on a moral language that, for many of their citizens, is inseparable from Sabda, while their official theories of public reason hesitate to recognise Sabda as anything more than a private source of motivation.

1.1 From pure logic to dignity and telos: the trajectory of The Cohesive Tetrad

The present article is the third step in a larger project that develops The Cohesive Tetrad as a framework for truth governance (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b). The first step examined the status of pure logic and intra worldly rationality in that governance. It argued that logic, understood as the disciplined management of inference, consistency, and conceptual clarity, is indispensable yet insufficient to play the role of ultimate authority. Logic can test and clarify claims. It can unfold implications that are already latent in premises. It cannot, by itself, generate the norm and telos that tell us what is good, what is forbidden, and what human lives are for.

The second step turned to the terrain of human dignity and telos. It asked what is required if we want to take seriously the strongest claims that contemporary democracies make about human worth. It proposed a set of minimal dignity axioms and argued that, taken together, they cannot be rendered fully coherent by appealing only to human capacities, evolutionary history, or social contracts (Mutaqin 2025b; Waldron 2012; Nussbaum 2006; Sangiovanni 2017). These three candidates illuminate important aspects of moral life, yet they cannot, alone or in combination, bear the full weight of claims about inherent and equal dignity, non

instrumentalisation, the inclusion of the most vulnerable, and long term institutional accountability.

On that basis, the earlier work introduced Sabda, defined as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos, as a necessary horizon if minimal dignity axioms are to make sense (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b). Sabda does not float alone. It is embedded within The Cohesive Tetrad, a configuration of six registers that together form an architecture for truth governance: Sabda, Logic, Qualia, Mistika, Akhlak, and Intention–Trace Alignment. Sabda sets the horizon of norm and telos. Logic tests coherence and implication. Qualia names the lived experience of individuals and communities under regimes of law, policy, and technology. Mistika is defined as Mistika, the intentional–spiritual dimension of journeying toward direct encounter with the transcendent. Akhlak concerns the observable moral character of persons and institutions. Intention–Trace Alignment is defined as Intention–Trace Alignment, the degree of alignment between epistemic intention and epistemic moral trace across time. The present article takes these definitions and the dignity axioms as background (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b). It does not attempt to reargue the case. Instead, it asks what follows when this framework is brought into the explicitly political terrain of public reason in plural societies.

1.2 Moving to the political: public reason and deep pluralism

With that background in place, the focus of this third article shifts from the metaphysical and axiological questions of norm and telos to a political question. The question is how claims to truth, especially those grounded in Sabda, should appear in democratic public reasoning under conditions of deep pluralism (Rawls 1993; Habermas 1996; Forst 2012).

Deep pluralism is more than a diversity of preferences or lifestyles. It refers to the coexistence of comprehensive doctrines, worldviews, and epistemic authorities that can neither be reduced to one another nor straightforwardly ranked within a single immanent hierarchy. In such a context, democratic institutions are expected to justify their laws and policies to citizens who disagree, sometimes profoundly, about God, scripture, revelation, and the ultimate structure of reality.

The mainstream answer in political theory has been to develop models of public reason. These models, in their different ways, share a common intuition. Legitimate political justifications for constitutional essentials and fundamental questions of justice should not depend on claims that only adherents of one comprehensive doctrine can reasonably accept. Religious reasons may play a role in civil society and may motivate individual citizens, but at some point in the public justificatory process they must be translated into reasons that do not presuppose any particular authority of Sabda (Rawls 1993, 1997; Habermas 1996; Audi and Wolterstorff 1997). Once we accept the conclusions of the previous articles, however, a question becomes unavoidable. If our strongest claims about human dignity and telos in democratic life require Sabda as horizon, and if Sabda is defined precisely as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos, what happens when models of public reason insist that Sabda can at most be a private motivational background, while the final public justification must remain independent of any revelatory source (Larmore 1996; Quong 2011; Mutaqin 2025b)? This article takes that tension as its main object of analysis.

1.3 Thesis and contribution

The main thesis of this article can be stated in direct terms. If we take seriously both our strongest commitments to human dignity and telos and the realities of deep pluralism, then dominant models of public reason that privatise Sabda are structurally unstable. They oscillate between an empty secularism in which the sources of norm and telos are left unnamed and a defensive stance that inadvertently fuels reactive projects of theocratic capture (Taylor 2007; Forst 2012). By integrating Sabda, understood as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos, within the multi register architecture of The Cohesive Tetrad, we can articulate a model of democratic truth governance in which Sabda is publicly present under disciplined conditions that protect basic liberties, institutional accountability, and the dignity of dissenters (Mutaqin 2025b; Rawls 1997; Habermas 2006; Forst 2012).

From this thesis follow four specific contributions. First, the article offers a systematic diagnosis of Rawlsian, Habermasian, and liberal neutral models of public reason from the standpoint of the dignity axioms and the role of Sabda developed in earlier work (Rawls 1993, 1997; Habermas 1996; Larmore 1996; Quong 2011). The diagnosis is reconstructive rather than merely external. Second, the article develops the concept of democratic truth governance as a concrete architecture rather than a metaphor, drawing on The Cohesive Tetrad as articulated in previous work (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b; Forst 2012). Third, the article redefines public reason as a multi register process rather than a single register vocabulary, engaging debates on justification and the public sphere (Forst 2012; Fraser 1990, 2008). Fourth, the article demonstrates the discriminative power of this architecture through stylised cases in bioethics, social policy, and the governance of digital and artificial intelligence systems (Pellegrino 1999; Fineman 2008; O'Neil 2016; Eubanks 2018; Cath 2018; Floridi and Cowls 2019), and in this way prepares the ground for a fourth article that will focus more specifically on law and artificial intelligence.

1.4 Roadmap

The rest of the article proceeds in six steps. Section 2 reconstructs dominant models of public reason and religion in contemporary political theory, focusing on Rawlsian political liberalism, Habermasian discourse theory, and the practical configuration of liberal neutrality and procedural secularism. Section 3 develops a critical assessment of these models using the minimal dignity axioms and introduces the ideal types of empty secularism and fearful theocracy. Section 4 introduces the notion of democratic truth governance and recalls in a focused way the position of Sabda within The Cohesive Tetrad. Section 5 translates this architecture into a new account of public reason as a multi register practice. Section 6 applies the architecture to stylised cases in bioethics, social policy, and artificial intelligence governance. Section 7 concludes by drawing out theoretical and practical implications and situating the argument within the broader series on The Cohesive Tetrad.

2. Dominant models of public reason and religion

This section reconstructs three influential ways of thinking about public reason and religion in contemporary political theory. The aim is not to dismiss them in a polemical way, but to understand what they are trying to protect and why they have become attractive in plural democracies (Rawls 1993; Habermas 1996; Larmore 1996; Quong 2011). Only after this

sympathetic reconstruction will the article subject them to tests posed by the minimal dignity axioms and the role of Sabda.

The three configurations considered here are: Rawlsian public reason in political liberalism, Habermasian discourse theory in a postsecular key, and the looser but powerful pattern of liberal neutrality and procedural secularism that shapes many democratic practices. All three try to preserve freedom and equality under deep pluralism. All three also share a reluctance to allow Sabda, understood as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos, to appear as such within the justificatory structure of law and policy.

2.1 Rawlsian public reason: political liberalism and the proviso

John Rawls's political liberalism has been one of the most influential attempts to describe how a democratic society can remain stable and just over time under conditions of reasonable pluralism (Rawls 1993). Rawls starts from the fact that citizens in modern democracies endorse a wide range of comprehensive doctrines. He argues that it would be both unjust and imprudent for the state to base its fundamental principles on the truth of any one such doctrine. In place of that, he proposes a freestanding political conception of justice, articulated in political rather than metaphysical terms.

Within this framework, Rawls introduces the idea of public reason. Public reason is the kind of reasoning appropriate when citizens and officials justify their positions on constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice (Rawls 1993, 1997). In such contexts, citizens have a duty of civility. This duty requires them to offer one another reasons that rest on political values that other reasonable citizens can accept, despite their differences in comprehensive doctrines. Religious reasons are not completely excluded from political discussion, but they are subject to a proviso. Citizens who invoke such reasons must, in due course, also be willing to support the same political positions with public reasons that do not presuppose any comprehensive doctrine (Rawls 1997; Audi and Wolterstorff 1997).

From the perspective of The Cohesive Tetrad, there is much to appreciate in this Rawlsian architecture. It takes seriously the dangers of religious majoritarianism and state endorsement of religious truth claims and seeks to protect minorities from coercion (Larmore 1996; Forst 2012). At the same time, the architecture has a clear implication. Even if citizens may be personally motivated by Sabda, the official justificatory language of law and policy must become independent of Sabda when it addresses the community as a whole. Sabda is, at most, a background motivation, not part of the public structure that explains why certain claims about human dignity and telos have authority over all (Mutaqin 2025b).

2.2 Habermasian discourse theory: postsecular learning and translation

Jürgen Habermas shares Rawls's concern for legitimacy under conditions of pluralism, but his discourse theory develops a different route. For Habermas, the legitimacy of law in a constitutional democracy arises from procedures in which those affected by legal norms can participate as equals in rational deliberation (Habermas 1996). Law functions as a medium that translates communicative power, generated in public debates, into administrative power.

In later writings on postsecular society, Habermas recognises more explicitly that religions remain important sources of moral insight and motivation. He argues that a reflexively secular

society ought not treat religious contributions merely as residues of an earlier stage, but as possible bearers of truth (Habermas 2006, 2008). This has two consequences. First, secular citizens have a duty of openness; they should be willing to listen to religious arguments in their own language and to participate in a cooperative effort of translation. Second, Habermas differentiates between informal public spheres and formal institutions. In civil society, citizens are free to use religious language, including explicit references to scripture and revelation. In parliaments, courts, and administrations, however, the language that counts for the justification of law must be secular (Habermas 1996, 2006).

From the standpoint of The Cohesive Tetrad, this is a significant advance over rigid secularism. Habermas acknowledges the epistemic status of religious traditions and treats them as partners in mutual learning (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007). Yet the structural role assigned to religious reasons remains limited. Only the secularly translated residue of religious claims can enter the final justification of law. The authority of Sabda as Sabda, that is as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos, is not recognised at the point where legal norms are adopted and enforced (Habermas 2006; Forst 2012; Mutaqin 2025b).

2.3 Liberal neutrality and procedural secularism in practice

Alongside these explicit theories, many democracies operate with a more diffuse set of ideas often referred to as liberal neutrality and procedural secularism. Here the emphasis falls less on systematic philosophical accounts and more on institutional arrangements and political culture (Larmore 1996; Quong 2011). The ideal of neutrality holds that the state should not adopt any comprehensive doctrine as its official view of the world. Procedural secularism translates this into concrete practices that separate religious institutions from the state and encourage the use of allegedly general, rational, or scientific reasons in law and policy (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007).

Over time, however, a drift often occurs. In the absence of a shared articulation of ultimate norm and telos, public reasoning and policy design tend to rely increasingly on technocratic and economic rationality (Forst 2012; Galeotti 2015). Decisions are framed in terms of efficiency, cost effectiveness, and system stability. Human dignity and telos continue to be mentioned, but the operative criteria for choosing between options are provided primarily by models of risk, utility, and system maintenance. The result is a configuration the article later names empty secularism (Taylor 2007; Mutaqin 2025b).

2.4 Preliminary assessment from the horizon of dignity and telos

A fair assessment of these models must begin by acknowledging their accomplishments (Rawls 1993; Habermas 1996; Larmore 1996; Quong 2011). They seek to prevent the fusion of state power with any single religious or anti religious doctrine and to protect minorities and freedom of conscience. Yet when viewed from the horizon of dignity and telos, as clarified in earlier work, a shared limitation becomes visible (Waldron 2012; Nussbaum 2006). All three configurations try to hold together two commitments. On the one hand, they wish to affirm a strong language of human dignity and equal moral worth. On the other hand, they are reluctant to acknowledge Sabda, or any analogous revelatory source, as a public authority in relation to norm and telos.

The minimal dignity axioms developed in previous work sharpen this tension (Mutaqin 2025b; Sangiovanni 2017). If we claim that every human being has inherent dignity not reducible to function, that this dignity is equal, that no one may be reduced to a mere instrument, that the full range of vulnerability is included in the scope of concern, and that institutions must be accountable to their own historical trace, then we owe an account of what humans are and why their worth has that structure. Capacities, evolution, and contracts, taken alone or together, cannot fully answer that demand. Sabda was introduced as the necessary horizon. If this is right, then models of public reason that refuse to let Sabda appear in the justificatory structure of law and policy face a choice. Either they loosen the content of their dignity talk so that it no longer carries the full weight of the axioms, or they tacitly rely on sources of norm and telos that they are unwilling to name (Taylor 2007; Forst 2012; Mutaqin 2025b). This sets the stage for the analysis of empty secularism and fearful theocracy.

3. Two failures: empty secularism and fearful theocracy

The previous section showed that dominant models of public reason attempt to stabilise democracy under deep pluralism by keeping Sabda at a distance from the justificatory structure of law and policy (Taylor 2007; Forst 2012; Casanova 1994). They do so for reasons that are not trivial. Yet once the minimal dignity axioms and the role of Sabda are taken seriously, these models face an internal strain. Under that strain, democratic practices tend to gravitate toward two defective configurations: empty secularism and fearful theocracy.

3.1 Empty secularism: when procedures remain and telos evaporates

Empty secularism is not identical with the principled separation of religious institutions and the state. It is a structural condition in which the horizon of norm and telos that informs public justification is no longer articulated, even though the language of human dignity and rights remains in use (Taylor 2007). The drift toward empty secularism can begin with reasonable commitments to neutrality and accessibility of reasons but gradually erodes the public acknowledgment of any authoritative source of norm and telos, including Sabda (Larmore 1996; Quong 2011; Forst 2012; Galeotti 2015).

When we test this configuration against the minimal dignity axioms, the deficiencies become visible. Axiom 1 and Axiom 2 are compromised when persons are evaluated primarily in terms of productivity, earning potential, or risk profile, undermining inherent and equal dignity (Nussbaum 2006; Waldron 2012; Fineman 2008). Axiom 3 is threatened when persons are treated as variables in optimisation problems, especially under regimes of data driven governance (Meilaender 2009; Jonas 1984). Axiom 4 suffers when those at the edges of life or with expensive needs are systematically disadvantaged (Fineman 2008). Axiom 5 is weakened by short time horizons and procedural self satisfaction that neglect the historical trace of exclusion and humiliation (Jonas 1984; Forst 2012). From the vantage point of The Cohesive Tetrad, empty secularism can be described as a configuration in which Logic and fragments of Qualia are used without being anchored in Sabda, Mistika, Akhlak, or Intention–Trace Alignment (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b).

3.2 Fearful theocracy: when one interpretation of Sabda freezes the circuit

Fearful theocracy is the mirror image of empty secularism. It arises when communities that have experienced the injuries of hollow normativity respond by attempting to reinstall Sabda at the centre of political power, yet do so in a way that conflates Sabda with one historically contingent interpretation and insulates that interpretation from correction (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007; MacIntyre 1981). A monopoly over interpretation is asserted, political deliberation is reduced to one way sabda reasoning, dissent is delegitimised, and Sabda is at risk of being instrumentalised for projects of identity and control.

Subjected to the dignity axioms, fearful theocracy fails as well. Axiom 1 and Axiom 2 are violated when dissenters or minorities are treated as less than full participants in public life, even if their formal status as citizens remains intact (Nussbaum 2006; Kittay 1999). Axiom 3 is threatened when lives and bodies are treated as raw material for projects of religious purification or cultural restoration (Fineman 2008; Meilaender 2009). Axiom 4 suffers when the most vulnerable belong to already marginalised groups, whose suffering is rationalised as a necessary cost of maintaining purity or order (Fineman 2008). Axiom 5 is undermined when institutions present themselves as faithful embodiments of Sabda by definition, deflecting criticism of their historical record as an attack on the sacred (Jonas 1984; Forst 2012). Viewed through The Cohesive Tetrad, fearful theocracy is a configuration in which Sabda is asserted without allowing Logic, Qualia, Mistika, Akhlak, and Intention–Trace Alignment to perform their proper work of testing and refining claims made in its name (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b; MacIntyre 1981).

3.3 Structural connection and the search for a third configuration

Empty secularism and fearful theocracy can appear as opposites. Yet at the structural level they are connected. Both arise from a misplacement of Sabda within the architecture of truth governance (Taylor 2007; Forst 2012). Empty secularism misplaces Sabda by expelling it from the public structure of justification. Fearful theocracy misplaces Sabda by collapsing it into one interpretation that is placed beyond correction. In both cases, the relationship between Sabda and the other registers of The Cohesive Tetrad is distorted (Galeotti 2015; Sangiovanni 2017).

If the analysis of earlier work is accepted, democracies that wish to uphold strong claims about human dignity and telos cannot remain indefinitely in either configuration (Mutaqin 2025b). They face a trilemma. They can weaken their dignity talk so that it no longer asserts more than their secular foundations can justify. They can slide into or embrace fearful theocracy. Or they can search for a third configuration in which Sabda is publicly acknowledged as horizon of norm and telos, while the full architecture of The Cohesive Tetrad structures the way in which claims to truth, including those grounded in Sabda, move through democratic institutions.

4. Sabda and the architecture of democratic truth governance

The analysis so far has shown that dominant models of public reason either hollow out the public horizon of norm and telos or invite reactive attempts to enthrone one interpretation of Sabda as unchallengeable political authority (Mutaqin 2025b). If the minimal dignity axioms and the earlier arguments for Sabda are taken seriously, neither outcome is acceptable. We

need a configuration in which Sabda can play its normative role without destroying democratic freedom, pluralism, and institutional accountability.

4.1 The position of Sabda within The Cohesive Tetrad

The Cohesive Tetrad is a six register architecture for truth governance. It consists of Sabda, Logic, Qualia, Mistika, Akhlak, and Intention–Trace Alignment (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b). Sabda is understood as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos. Logic refers to disciplined practices of inference and consistency checking. Qualia names lived experience under regimes of law, policy, and technology. Mistika is the intentional–spiritual dimension of journeying toward direct encounter with the transcendent. Akhlak concerns observable moral character. Intention–Trace Alignment concerns the degree of alignment between epistemic intention and epistemic moral trace across time.

In this architecture, Sabda occupies the place of horizon setting authority. The other registers do not compete with Sabda at the same level. They act as channels through which claims grounded in Sabda and claims grounded in secular expertise must pass to be considered trustworthy in public life (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b). Holding Sabda and the other registers together in a disciplined way is essential to resist both empty secularism and fearful theocracy.

4.2 Defining democratic truth governance

Democratic truth governance, as used in this article, does not mean that a government possesses truth in a proprietary sense. It refers instead to the structures and practices through which claims to truth, especially in matters of norm and telos, are brought into democratic institutions, tested, and subjected to correction over time (Forst 2012; Sangiovanni 2017). Four conditions define democratic truth governance in a plural society: openness of sources, protection of dignity and freedom of conscience, mechanisms of internal correction, and integration of multiple registers. These conditions echo and deepen the dignity axioms (Waldron 2012; Nussbaum 2006) and the right to justification in contemporary political theory (Forst 2012).

On this definition, The Cohesive Tetrad is a candidate architecture for democratic truth governance. It does not prescribe a single constitutional form. It specifies normative and epistemic patterns that any democratic arrangement must display if it is to treat dignity and telos with integrity (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b).

4.3 The normative role of Sabda in democracy

Within this architecture, Sabda plays four normative roles that cannot be fully assumed by other sources. First, Sabda grounds inherent and equal dignity by declaring that every human being is created, addressed, and evaluated in a way that does not depend on capacity, status, or contribution (Waldron 2012; Nussbaum 2006; Sangiovanni 2017). Second, Sabda establishes non instrumentalisation as a binding limit by speaking of humans as bearers of a calling or telos that cannot be subordinated to purely instrumental calculus (Jonas 1984; Meilaender 2009). Third, Sabda integrates the full spectrum of vulnerability into the horizon of concern by addressing the weak and marginal in a way that refuses their exclusion (Kittay 1999; Fineman 2008; Nussbaum 2006). Fourth, Sabda provides a norm for evaluating the historical trace of institutions by naming forms of oppression and calling for repentance (Jonas 1984; Forst 2012).

None of these roles can be adequately filled by appeals to capacities, evolution, or mutually advantageous contracts alone. Those appeals may contribute partial insights. They do not suffice to stabilise strong dignity claims that democracies make in their constitutions and court decisions. Sabda is required if such claims are to be more than inherited rhetoric (Mutaqin 2025b).

4.4 The epistemic priority of Sabda over logic and data

Acknowledging the normative role of Sabda in democracy raises a delicate question. In what sense can we speak of the priority of Sabda over logic and data without denying the legitimacy of rational inquiry and empirical evidence. The article answers by distinguishing levels of authority. Sabda has priority at the level of norm and telos, setting boundaries and directions within which logic and data operate (Mutaqin 2025b; Jonas 1984). Logic and data have instrumental authority, not final authority, in matters of norm and telos (Forst 2012; Floridi and Cowls 2019). When a conflict arises between what appears to be technically optimal and what Sabda declares incompatible with human dignity, Sabda has preemptive priority (Jonas 1984; MacIntyre 1981). This pattern resists empty secularism by refusing to allow logic and data to become silent sources of norm and telos, and resists fearful theocracy by insisting that claims about what Sabda requires must constantly be checked in the light of logic and empirical knowledge.

4.5 Integrating Sabda into democratic processes through the Tetrad

With these distinctions in view, we can describe in more concrete terms how Sabda and the other registers of The Cohesive Tetrad can structure democratic decision making. The article presents a schematic sequence: formulation of public claims, logical and conceptual testing, confrontation with lived experience, examination of intentional orientation, evaluation of moral character and institutional patterns, and long term audit of intention and trace (Rawls 1993; Habermas 1996; Forst 2012; Kittay 1999; Fineman 2008; MacIntyre 1981; Nussbaum 2006; Jonas 1984; Mutaqin 2025b). In this sequence, Sabda is integrated into democratic processes neither as a private optional background nor as a trump card that ends discussion. It functions as the horizon of norm and telos within a multi register architecture that demands logical clarity, attentiveness to experience, examination of intention, cultivation of Akhlak, and long term accountability.

5. The Cohesive Tetrad as an architecture of public reason

If democratic truth governance names the way claims to norm and telos should move through institutions, public reason names the way citizens and officials ought to speak to one another when they justify coercive laws. The previous sections argued that dominant models of public reason are structurally unstable once the dignity axioms and the need for Sabda as horizon are taken seriously (Rawls 1993, 1997; Habermas 1996; Taylor 2007; Forst 2012; Galeotti 2015). This section proposes an alternative. It develops The Cohesive Tetrad not only as a framework for truth governance but as an architecture of public reason suited to plural democracies.

5.1 From one register to multi register public reason

One register ideals of public reason emerged as a response to genuine dangers: the risk that citizens justify laws by invoking the truth of their own comprehensive doctrines, placing others in a position of permanent inferiority (Rawls 1993, 1997; Habermas 1996). These models ask citizens to offer public reasons couched in a vocabulary that does not presuppose acceptance of any particular view about God, revelation, or metaphysics, often framed as political values or constitutional principles (Audi and Wolterstorff 1997; Larmore 1996; Quong 2011). Yet, once the strength of dignity language in constitutional practice is recognised, one register models either thin out the shared vocabulary so that it no longer carries strong claims, or they rely implicitly on unacknowledged sources of norm and telos. In practice, this often yields the empty secularism described earlier (Taylor 2007; Forst 2012; Galeotti 2015).

The alternative proposed here is to treat public reason as a multi register practice structured by The Cohesive Tetrad. Public reason is defined as the practice by which citizens and institutions in a democracy bring claims about coercive laws and policies under the joint discipline of Sabda, Logic, Qualia, Mistika, Akhlak, and Intention–Trace Alignment, in order to arrive at decisions that can be justified to all as consistent with human dignity and telos amid deep disagreement (Mutaqin 2025b; Forst 2012; Fraser 1990, 2008). Sabda based arguments are not required to disappear from public speech (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007). Secular moral arguments and scientific insights are not demoted (Forst 2012; Sangiovanni 2017). Accessibility is achieved at the level of process rather than linguistic homogeneity (Fraser 1990, 2008; Galeotti 2015).

5.2 Normative conditions for the public presence of Sabda

If Sabda is to be publicly acknowledged as horizon of norm and telos, certain conditions must be in place to prevent collapse into fearful theocracy. The article articulates four such conditions: universality of address, non coercion of conscience, accountable interpretation, and protection of dissent. Universality of address requires that Sabda, as invoked in the public sphere, be understood as speaking about the dignity and telos of all humans, not only adherents of a particular community (Nussbaum 2006; Waldron 2012; Sangiovanni 2017). Non coercion of conscience reinforces the liberal insight that the state may not compel belief, even when norms are justified by reference to Sabda (Audi and Wolterstorff 1997; Forst 2012). Accountable interpretation insists that claims about what Sabda requires be open to scrutiny by Logic, Qualia, Akhlak, and Intention–Trace Alignment (Forst 2012; MacIntyre 1981; Mutaqin 2025b). Protection of dissent safeguards the status of dissenting citizens and internal critics as full bearers of dignity, and recognises dissent as a carrier of Qualia and a trigger for alignment audits (Fraser 1990, 2008; Galeotti 2015).

5.3 Institutional roles of the six registers

If The Cohesive Tetrad is to function as an architecture of public reason, its registers must find concrete expression in institutions. In legislatures, this implies that Sabda informed arguments may appear explicitly, that logical scrutiny of justifications becomes a recognised part of practice, that structured attention to Qualia is institutionalised, and that legislatures commit themselves to periodic evaluation of the long term effects of laws, especially on vulnerable groups (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007; Rawls 1993; Forst 2012; Kittay 1999; Fineman 2008;

Jonas 1984; Mutaqin 2025b). In courts, it means that the horizon of Sabda and dignity that shaped constitutional commitments is acknowledged without turning judges into theologians, that logical and doctrinal consistency is central, that experiential input from litigants and amici curiae is taken seriously, and that courts remain willing to revisit precedents whose historical trace has become unjust (Habermas 1996; Waldron 2012; Nussbaum 2006; Kittay 1999; Fineman 2008; MacIntyre 1981; Jonas 1984; Mutaqin 2025b).

In executive agencies and bureaucratic practice, The Cohesive Tetrad informs both policy design and implementation. Sabda and the dignity axioms shape the horizon, while logic and data are used to understand causal relations and anticipate unintended effects, and Qualia is accessed through participatory processes (Nussbaum 2006; Fineman 2008; Forst 2012). Implementation is shaped by Mistika in the sense of accountability to a transcendent horizon, by Akhlak in organisational cultures, and by Intention–Trace Alignment through monitoring and evaluation systems that track lived consequences, not only quantitative outputs (MacIntyre 1981; Jonas 1984).

Finally, in ethics bodies and regulators concerned with biotechnology and artificial intelligence, The Cohesive Tetrad provides a template for evaluating powerful new systems. Sabda raises prior questions about practices that may be inherently incompatible with dignity and telos, even if efficient (Jonas 1984; O'Neil 2016; Eubanks 2018). Logic and data are employed to scrutinise technical properties and claims about safety (Cath 2018; Floridi and Cowls 2019). Qualia ensures that regulatory decisions are informed by the experiences of those most affected (Eubanks 2018; Fineman 2008). Mistika and Akhlak address the moral formation of designers, deployers, and regulators (MacIntyre 1981; Nussbaum 2006). Intention–Trace Alignment mandates ongoing audits of AI deployments (O'Neil 2016; Jonas 1984; Mutaqin 2025b).

6. Stylised cases: applying the architecture

The architecture proposed so far remains at a relatively high level of abstraction. To test its coherence and discriminative power, it must be brought into contact with situations that resemble the kinds of conflicts democracies actually face. The article therefore considers three stylised cases in bioethics, social policy, and digital governance.

6.1 Bioethics: fragile life at the threshold of death

The first case concerns the regulation of withdrawing life sustaining treatment from patients who are irreversibly unconscious, with no reasonable prospect of recovery and ambiguous prior wishes. Under empty secularism, the formal language of legislation and policy is secular and ostensibly neutral, and ethics committees frame the problem in terms of cost effectiveness and quality adjusted life years (Pellegrino 1999; Nussbaum 2006). Dignity is mentioned but functionally defined through proxies such as consciousness and capacity for preference. Those who cannot speak for themselves risk being treated primarily as cost centres.

Under fearful theocracy, by contrast, an authorised reading of Sabda declares any withdrawal of life sustaining treatment impermissible. Law mandates continuation of all interventions until biological death, regardless of context, and families or clinicians who question this are reprimanded as lacking faith (Meilaender 2009; Jonas 1984). Sabda is invoked constantly, but

Logic, Qualia, and Akhlak are muted. Patients and families risk becoming instruments in a project of defending an interpretation.

Under democratic truth governance shaped by The Cohesive Tetrad, Sabda speaks publicly about the worth of each human life and declares such lives non disposable, yet interpretations of Sabda are subjected to logical analysis and experiential testing (Pellegrino 1999; Sulmasy 2002; Meilaender 2009; Kittay 1999; Fineman 2008; Mutaqin 2025b). Logic distinguishes between killing and allowing to die, between proportionate and disproportionate interventions. Qualia is accessed through structured encounters with families and clinicians. Mistika and Akhlak examine motives and institutional cultures. Intention–Trace Alignment commits the polity to revisiting regulations in light of their historical effects. The resulting law may prohibit active ending of life, affirm a strong presumption in favour of basic care, and permit withdrawal of futile interventions under clear criteria. It honours dignity axioms more faithfully than the alternatives.

6.2 Social policy: costly lives and the welfare of disabled citizens

The second case concerns long term support for citizens with profound disabilities who require extensive assistance and are unlikely to enter the labour market. Under empty secularism, debates are framed largely in terms of fiscal sustainability and incentives. Disabled citizens are acknowledged as bearers of rights, but the operative logic weighs the financial cost of comprehensive support against aggregate welfare gains (Nussbaum 2006; Fineman 2008). Those whose needs are most expensive and who contribute least to measured productivity are placed under suspicion.

Under fearful theocracy, disabled citizens may be described as bearers of special blessings or tests of the community's faith, yet concrete structures of state support remain thin. Families are exhorted to accept their burdens as divine vocation, while requests for more assistance risk being stigmatised (Kittay 1999; Meilaender 2009). Sabda is used to confer meaning on suffering, but Logic, Qualia, and Akhlak are not adequately engaged. Structural injustice is spiritualised.

Under democratic truth governance, Sabda shapes the horizon by speaking of the equal worth of those who are weak and of obligations to care for those who cannot care for themselves (Nussbaum 2006; Kittay 1999). Logic examines how different designs distribute burdens and opportunities, drawing on egalitarian theory (Anderson 1999; Fraser 1990, 2008). Qualia is brought into the centre through participatory processes that involve disabled citizens and their families as co designers of support systems (Kittay 1999; Fineman 2008). Mistika and Akhlak ask what public authorities are really seeking in these debates and expose temptations to preserve comfort while retaining moral self images (MacIntyre 1981). Intention–Trace Alignment requires that programmes be reviewed over time for unintended patterns of dependency or exclusion (Jonas 1984; Mutaqin 2025b). The result is a social policy that commits serious resources to ensuring that even citizens with profound disabilities can live in ways that express their telos as human beings.

6.3 Digital infrastructures and AI: scoring, sorting, and governing by data

The third case concerns the adoption of artificial intelligence systems for social governance, such as algorithmic scoring systems to allocate welfare benefits, predict crime risk, or prioritise

access to public services. Under empty secularism, arguments for such systems focus on efficiency, accuracy, and the reduction of human bias (O'Neil 2016; Eubanks 2018). Human dignity is invoked as a reason to eliminate explicit discrimination, but deeper questions about whether certain forms of automated classification are compatible with treating citizens as bearers of telos are rarely asked. People who occupy marginal positions become subjects of intensified surveillance and control, mapped through data traces they did not consent to produce.

Under fearful theocracy, Sabda is invoked to justify digital systems for moral surveillance and enforcement. Authorities may present scoring systems as tools for identifying those who deviate from prescribed behavioural norms, including religious ones, and integrate participation in worship and conformity to religious codes into composite scores (Jonas 1984; Taylor 2007). The distinction between divine judgement and human monitoring is blurred, and logical or empirical questions about system harms are dismissed.

Within a Tetrad based architecture, debates about AI for social governance take a different shape. Sabda raises prior questions about domains where algorithmic scoring is inherently incompatible with human dignity and telos and must be ruled out in advance (Jonas 1984; Forst 2012). Logic and data are fully engaged but treated as instruments, not final authorities (Cath 2018; Floridi and Cowls 2019). Qualia is foregrounded through participatory assessments of communities likely to be targeted, whose experiences with earlier waves of data driven governance are analysed as evidence (Eubanks 2018; Fineman 2008). Mistika and Akhlak address the moral formation of designers and regulators, focusing on temptations to outsource responsibility to machines (MacIntyre 1981; Nussbaum 2006). Intention–Trace Alignment mandates ongoing audits of deployments, with willingness to curtail or redesign systems whose historical trace reveals new patterns of discrimination or exclusion (O'Neil 2016; Jonas 1984; Mutaqin 2025b).

6.4 Lessons from the cases

Taken together, these stylised cases show that The Cohesive Tetrad does more than offer a vocabulary for criticising empty secularism and fearful theocracy. It provides a structured way of reasoning that preserves genuine achievements of secular public reason, retains the normative depth supplied by Sabda, and equips democratic institutions to test and correct both secular and religious claims by bringing them under the joint discipline of Logic, Qualia, Mistika, Akhlak, and Intention–Trace Alignment (Mutaqin 2025b; Forst 2012; Nussbaum 2006; O'Neil 2016; Eubanks 2018).

7. Implications and conclusion

This article asked how Sabda, defined as Revelatory Word, the authoritative source of norm and telos, can be integrated into democratic public reason under conditions of deep pluralism. It argued that dominant models of public reason, while motivated by legitimate concerns, are structurally unstable once we take seriously both strong claims about human dignity and the role of Sabda in grounding those claims (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b; Rawls 1993, 1997; Habermas 1996; Larmore 1996; Quong 2011). It proposed The Cohesive Tetrad as an architecture for democratic truth governance and public reason and tested that architecture through stylised cases in bioethics, social policy, and AI governance.

Theoretically, the proposal challenges the assumption that respect for pluralism necessarily requires the privatisation of Sabda (Taylor 2007; Casanova 1994; Mutaqin 2025b). If the dignity axioms are correct, then attempts to sustain strong dignity claims while excluding Sabda from public justification are unstable. It reframes public reason as a process rather than a single language, suggesting that accessibility and reciprocity are secured by exposing reasons to shared registers of scrutiny rather than by forcing them into an allegedly neutral idiom (Forst 2012; Fraser 1990, 2008). It clarifies that the dangers of political religion are not intrinsic to the public presence of Sabda but to particular ways of misplacing Sabda in the architecture of truth governance (Jonas 1984; MacIntyre 1981; Galeotti 2015).

Practically, the Tetrad architecture invites re examination of institutional design. Legislatures might revise procedures to give more structured place to experiential testimony from vulnerable groups, to long term audits of legislative consequences, and to explicit reflection on the moral character of implementing institutions (Waldron 2012; Nussbaum 2006; Fineman 2008; Forst 2012). Courts might deepen engagement with historical sources that shaped constitutional commitments to dignity, while remaining cautious about presenting themselves as arbiters of theological truth. Executive agencies might integrate participatory processes and character formation into civil service training. Ethics bodies and regulators in biotechnology and artificial intelligence might adopt evaluation frameworks that explicitly track all six registers and refuse to treat technical success or efficiency as sufficient justification (O'Neil 2016; Eubanks 2018; Cath 2018; Floridi and Cowls 2019). At the level of research, further work could develop case studies, explore how different religious traditions articulate Sabda like notions, and elaborate indicators for assessing Intention–Trace Alignment in complex institutional settings (Forst 2012; Sangiovanni 2017; Mutaqin 2025b).

Within the larger sequence of work on The Cohesive Tetrad, this article occupies an intermediate position. The first article argued that pure logic cannot be the ultimate authority in truth governance. The second argued that strong claims about human dignity and telos require Sabda, embedded within The Cohesive Tetrad, if they are to make sense (Mutaqin 2025a, 2025b). The present article has extended this argument into the domain of democracy and public reason, showing how Sabda and the Tetrad can underpin an architecture of democratic truth governance that avoids both empty secularism and fearful theocracy. The next article in the series will apply this architecture more tightly to the domain of law and artificial intelligence, asking how legal systems and AI infrastructures can be designed, interpreted, and governed so that they become instruments of a truth governance that honours human dignity and telos under Sabda, rather than engines of new forms of domination or hollow proceduralism (O'Neil 2016; Cath 2018; Floridi and Cowls 2019).

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